

- We are living through one of those curious periods in Church history known as an “interregnum.” This refers to the period between the reigns of two popes, and it begins when a pope dies or retires.
- It’s a period of uncertainty, yet a period replete with lots of ceremony that highlights the critical importance of this time.
- For example, today the Church completes the official 9-day period of mourning for Pope Francis known as the “Novendiales,” which began on his funeral day.
- For the past 9 days, the College of Cardinals has offered a public Mass for the holy father, praying for the repose of his soul, with a different cardinal presiding each day.
- Then, of course, this week – beginning on May 7 – the College of Cardinals will head to the Sistine Chapel for the conclave to elect the next pope. No one knows how long the conclave will take.
- The shortest conclave in history was the 1939 conclave that elected Pope Pius XII – which lasted but a day and required only 3 ballots.
- The longest conclave, however, was 1006 days because of serious infighting amongst the cardinals, and it finally resulted in the election of Pope Gregory X in 1271. Yet, most conclaves are completed within 2-5 days.
- The Cardinals will have a Mass together at St. Peter’s Basilica on Wednesday morning to pray for wisdom and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and then they will be sequestered within the walls of the Vatican, voting each day in the Sistine Chapel.
- Poetically, the cardinals vote before Michelangelo’s larger-than-life fresco of the Last Judgment, saying as they slide their ballot into the ballot box: “I call as my witness Christ the Lord who will be my judge, that my vote is given to the one who before God I think should be elected.”
- The rituals and ceremonies of the conclave involve a great deal of prayer to the Holy Spirit and the saints. In fact, the cardinals will chant the *Litany of the Saints* as they solemnly process into the Sistine Chapel. But it’s important for us, the faithful, to be praying, too!
- As much as ever in Church history, we must pray for a strong, wise, and godly pope: a man with courage, faith, and integrity – as well as the strength of character necessary to navigate the complexities of the Church at this time.
- More than ever, this is a time for all of us to humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord and to ask God for His mercy. More than ever, this is a time for us to beg God for a good shepherd.
- As Providence would have it, we are given a very beautiful Gospel to reflect upon today, in which we see our Lord giving clear direction to our first pope, St. Peter, on how to lead the Church.
- When we hear this Gospel, we tend to focus on Jesus requiring St. Peter to make a three-fold confession of love to make amends for having denied our Lord three times. Yet, I think it’s important that we pay attention to our Lord’s response to Peter’s affirmation of his love.
- When Peter affirms that he loves Jesus the first time, our Lord says to him in return: “Feed my lambs.” When Peter affirms that he loves Jesus the second time, our Lord says: “Tend my sheep.”
- And when good St. Peter affirms that he loves Jesus the third time, our Lord says: “Feed my sheep,” and then Jesus prophesies the type of death that St. Peter will eventually face.

- More than anyone else, the holy father must be a good shepherd, a true and living icon of Christ the Good Shepherd: a shepherd who *feeds* his lambs with the pure milk of Gospel truth, imbued with the warmth of charity.
- As the Vicar of Christ on earth, the holy father must be the one to tend to the members of the Church, the “sheep,” with an unshakeable faith and an unwavering hope.
- For when the faith, hope, and charity of the Holy Father is all that it should be, his virtues strengthen us and inspire us to be more vigorous in exercising our faith, hope, and charity.
- For example, think about how the witness, preaching, and teaching of Pope St. John Paul II was able to ignite the faith of so many people throughout the world – especially the youth!
- That’s the power of the papacy when exercised with virtue.
- Yet virtue alone is not enough for a pope to be effective; he’s got to have backbone! As St. Peter himself wrote in his first epistle, in Christ’s sufferings we find an example that all of us are called to follow, especially those in Church leadership.
- Good shepherds willingly lay down their lives for their sheep!
- Like so many of the saintly popes from ages past, we must pray that our next pope will be a man willing to suffer all that’s necessary to lead our Church as Christ Himself would without counting the cost. In short, we need a saint!
- Of the 266 popes in our Church history, 83 have been canonized so far – a little less than 1/3. Interestingly, all of the first 35 popes are saints, and 31 of them were martyrs.
- Those first 35 popes all reigned during the first 4 centuries of Church history, a time of persecution and uncertainty for the Church. They became saints because they fulfilled the demands of their office and suffered and endured much in doing so during those times.
- Yet, as we survey the world today, we are finding the Church coming under increasing attacks and persecution. We, too, are living through a time of uncertainty in the Church.
- We need a pope who is willing to do all he must to lead our Church through the suffering that will come upon him in this role, if he serves it out with courage and fidelity.
- And so, we must pray for the man who very likely will be elected *this* week, that he can be a good, virtuous, and courageous shepherd after the model of Christ the Good Shepherd, a shepherd willing to lay down his life for his sheep. May we be given a saintly pope.
- My brothers and sisters, this coming week is likely to be a very momentous week in the life of the Church. There is so much at stake as the College of Cardinals gathers for this next papal conclave.
- Let us each be sure to pray diligently in these next several days that the cardinals truly will be led by the Holy Spirit during the conclave, and not focus on the partisan politics that often afflict and divide our Church.
- And once our new pope is elected, may we prove ourselves good sheep who obediently follow the Master’s voice.
- St. Peter, pray for us. Pope St. John Paul II, pray for us. All you sainted popes, pray for us!